

# Equity-Centered Family Engagement and Leadership

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## Introduction

In 2019, North Carolina developed the *Early Childhood Family Engagement and Leadership Framework* to define and guide the inclusion of important family engagement concepts to be applied across early childhood sectors and agencies. In order for early childhood agencies to meaningfully support family engagement and leadership, they must meet the following conditions for success: family-centered, equity-centered, collaborative and transparent.

To continue to develop North Carolina's approach to partnering with families, this document outlines what **equity-centered** family engagement and leadership means and identifies action items for individuals, programs and systems. This is meant to serve as a starting point for ongoing discussion and work to prioritize equity as we build, improve and align our early childhood systems to be equity-driven, and to meet the needs of young children and their families.

## Vision

North Carolina's birth to five early childhood systems are family-centered and equitable, serving children in the context of their families and communities.

## Equity-Centered Approach

Equity is an approach to ensure all individuals and groups thrive by identifying and reducing unfair differences in access to opportunity, networks, power, resources, and supports. Equity-focused strategies address policies, practices, attitudes, and wording that reinforce unequal outcomes, and serve to eliminate disparities based on race, gender, class, immigration status, language, sexual orientation, disability, or another demographic indicator.



## What does “Family” mean?

An important facet of equity-centered family engagement at all levels is the understanding that “family” looks different from one child to the next. Program leaders and policy makers should use a broad and inclusive definition of “family engagement” to promote the participation of all types of families. “Family” can include biological, adoptive, and foster parents; grandparents and other relatives; and legal and informal guardians. Programs should respect and honor the wisdom and power of family in any form.



**EQUITY:** The state that would be achieved if individuals fared the same way in society regardless of race, gender, class, language, disability, or any other social or cultural characteristic. In practice, equity means all children and families receive necessary supports in a timely fashion so they can develop their full intellectual, social, and physical potential.<sup>1</sup>

– National Association for the Education of Young Children



## Critical Elements of Equity-Centered Family Engagement



### Prioritizing Relationships

Engagement requires meaningful, trusting relationships. Families should be recognized as assets, partners and experts on their children and feel welcome, heard and seen in all aspects of their child's development and education and in family leadership roles.

#### ACTION STEPS

##### Individual Engagement

- Prioritize responsive relationships that build trust and partnership.
- Ensure two-way communication between families and providers.
- Use strength-based approaches that respect the expertise and power within each family.
- Learn about and honor parents' and families' backgrounds, skills, traditions, language, etc.
- Link learning to relevant local context and home activities.

##### Shaping Programs and Services

- Develop communication feedback loops to incorporate families' input into program development and improvement.
- Work to counter historical biases that suggest certain family members or structures are more or less capable.

##### Influencing Policies and Systems

- Ensure that decision-making bodies are most accountable to the children and families they serve.
- When possible, work within existing community organizations and structures.
- Build relationships that reach across different community networks and systems.

## Sharing Power

Welcoming families as active participants in their child's services may mean reimagining traditional power dynamics. Family member voices should be included as equal agents, which means disrupting typical hierarchies and sharing power and responsibility for decision-making.

### ACTION STEPS

#### Individual Engagement

- Honor family members as experts on their children and their own experiences.
- View families as partners in collaboration and co-ownership, rather than only as sources of input and consultation.
- Recognize the strengths that families have and encourage them to identify where they need additional support.

#### Shaping Programs and Services

- Provide frequent opportunities for family members to come, observe and engage.
- If possible, hold meetings and activities at a shared, "neutral" community site.



### CONFLICT RESOLUTION:

Sharing power may require difficult conversations at times. It is important to identify strategies that will be used when conflicts arise. Intentional commitment to working through these issues will be particularly important when the lived experiences of families do not align with practitioner views or program requirements.

- Critically examine and create engagement spaces, signs and processes that promote equitable practices.
- Encourage everyone to be responsible for their own learning and critical reflection on racism and privilege.

#### Influencing Policies and Systems

- Convene decision-making bodies that include parents and family members, and that represent the demographics of the community.
- Create career pathways for parents to enter the early childhood workforce themselves.
- Align organizational policies and practices with principles of racial equity, shared power and access for all.

## Investing Time and Resources

Because systems are set up to perpetuate existing power structures, the implementation of equity-focused family engagement requires the active investment of time and resources to examine, dismantle and rebuild our service systems. Allocation of resources to promote diversity and inclusion, in the form of time, money, supports and accommodations, is critical. In the absence of intentional investment, oppressive systems may be reproduced.



### ACTION STEPS

#### Individual Engagement

- Allocate time for staff members to build relationships with children, families and communities. Trust and understanding are the result of intentional, consistent connection over time.

#### Shaping Programs and Services

- Review and ensure funding requirements and priorities align with equity-driven values.
- Prioritize patience and adaptability over a rigid plan.
- Provide resources to test leadership and organizational readiness strategies over time.

- Maintain regular opportunities for engagement at varying times and for varying durations to accommodate nontypical or inconsistent family schedules.

#### Influencing Policies and Systems

- Dedicate resources to building family and parent leadership through advocacy, data and policy analysis, leadership training, and parent stipends.
- Include families and support meaningful collaboration at every stage of decision-making processes.
- Make cultural responsiveness and racial equity a central facet of staff and volunteer training and professional development.



## Promoting Accessibility

Family engagement resources, activities and opportunities should be as transparent and accessible as possible for all members of the community. The specific support necessary is unique to each community, so it is important to identify and address potential barriers to participation.

### ACTION STEPS

#### Individual Engagement

- Be creative and attentive in working to identify barriers to engagement, including, but not limited to, barriers related to technology, preferred language, reliable transportation and physical accessibility.
- Individualize communications and engagement based on family preferences.

#### Shaping Programs and Services

- Minimize the use of jargon and unnecessarily heightened vocabulary in communication.
- Strive to incorporate accommodations as a central part of the meetings and activities.
- Support families in their preferred language.



#### Influencing Policies and Systems

- Work to increase availability and families' control over resources and information.
- Involve families in developing the program evaluation questions that are being asked, and in collecting and analyzing data.
- Update community members on the evolving status of the work they've done or contributed to.

## Committing to Reflection

We must consistently reflect on our own beliefs, and on the impacts that racism, classism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other systems of oppression have had in our communities. The action items below can be implemented at every level.

### ACTION STEPS

- Gather feedback on family engagement processes to identify where equity is prevailing and where it needs to be prioritized more.
- Support individuals in their own personal reflection of how they show up in the world and in child service spaces, and how they can better hold space for others to bring their full selves and strengths into these spaces.
- Consult the past and plan for the present. What communities have been underrepresented in the



past? Why? What is actively being done to remedy these disparities now?

- Understand that equity-focused family engagement is not an instantly impactful, one-size-fits-all policy. Commit to engaging in intentional, consistent ongoing reflection on how we can dismantle systems of power and further equity in our work.
- Engage in frank dialogue with leaders at all levels about the importance of actively addressing structural racism and implicit bias.



## Critical Elements and Action Steps for Equity Centered Family Engagement

	INDIVIDUAL ENGAGEMENT	SHAPING PROGRAMS AND SERVICES	INFLUENCING POLICIES AND SYSTEMS
Prioritizing Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsive relationships</li> <li>• Two-way communications</li> <li>• Strengths based approaches</li> <li>• Honor families</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication feedback loops</li> <li>• Counter historical biases about family members or family structure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decision making is accountable to children and families</li> <li>• Work within existing organizations</li> <li>• Cross-sector collaboration</li> </ul>
Sharing Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Honor family members as experts</li> <li>• Partner with families</li> <li>• Recognize strengths</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunities for family to observe and engage.</li> <li>• Examine the ways in which White supremacy culture is showing up.</li> <li>• Encourage everyone to be responsible for their own learning and critical reflection.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decision making bodies include family members and represent community demographics</li> <li>• Career pathways for parents to enter early childhood workforce</li> <li>• Align policies and practices with racial equity and shared power.</li> </ul>
Investing Time and Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff time is dedicated to building relationships with children, families and communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure funding priorities align with equity driven values</li> <li>• Prioritize patience and adaptability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build family leadership opportunities</li> <li>• Provide stipends</li> <li>• Staff professional development</li> </ul>
Promoting Accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individualize strategies</li> <li>• Be creative and attentive</li> <li>• Identify barriers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimize jargon</li> <li>• Include accommodations as central part of meetings</li> <li>• Use families' preferred language</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expand families' control over information and resources</li> <li>• Involve families in evaluation and data collection</li> </ul>
Committing to Reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gather feedback on family engagement practices to identify where equity needs to be prioritized more.</li> <li>• Support individual reflection on how they show up in child services spaces.</li> <li>• Commit to intentional, consistent ongoing reflection on how we can dismantle systems of power.</li> <li>• Engage in dialogue with leaders at all levels about actively addressing structural racism and implicit bias.</li> </ul>		

## Resources and Tools

- <sup>1</sup> Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education Position Statement, National Association for the Education of Young Children. Available at: [www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/equity](http://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/equity) *Position statement and recommendations focused on advancing equity in early childhood education.*
  - <sup>2</sup> Key Equity Terms and Concepts: A Glossary for Shared Understanding, Center for the Study of Social Policy. Available at: <https://cssp.org/resource/key-equity-terms-and-concepts-a-glossary-for-shared-understanding/> *This glossary contains definitions and sources for equity terms and concepts.*
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- [Start With Equity: The Children's Equity Project, Arizona State University Center for Child and Family Success](#). Tool available at: [Equity Strategic Plan Template to Advance Equity in Early Care and Education Systems](#). *This resource includes an equity toolkit for state-level agencies, and a 2021 policy report with analysis of data and research on early education inequities, and concrete recommendations for policymakers toward dismantling inequities.*
  - [Manifesto for Race Equity & Parent Leadership in Early Childhood Systems, Center for the Study of Social Policy](#). *This resource outlines a vision, goals and strategies for supporting and empowering parents, drawing on the success of Strengthening Families™.*
  - [Framework for Assessing Family Engagement in Systems Change, Family Voices](#). *This brief identifies criteria for building effective engagement, with specific regard to families of children/youth with special healthcare needs.*
  - [Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community as Partners in Education, Institute of Education Science](#). *This resource presents research, promising practices, and resources to guide educators in strengthening partnerships with families and community members.*
  - [Diversity-Informed Tenets for Work with Infants, Children and Families, Irving Harris Foundation](#). *The Tenets are a set of strategies to support professionals, organizations and systems in implementing diversity, inclusion and equity in their work with infants, children and families.*
  - [Ripples of Transformation: Families Leading Change in Early Childhood Systems](#). *This graphics-based document describes an integrated stream of opportunities for parents to be leaders in their families and communities, as well as in policies and systems.*
  - [Cultivating a Community of Champions for Children Through Transformative Family Engagement Lessons, W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#). *This report compiles lessons learned about equity-based family engagement from families, children and staff.*
  - [Parent Leadership Training: Parents as Collaborative Leaders, NC Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health, Children and Youth Branch](#). *This full day training curriculum includes a variety of modules developed to support leadership skills development among parents. The modules cover a variety of topics, including defining parent leadership, identifying personal leadership goals, critical elements of collaboration, stages of group development, tips for leading effective meetings, listening and asking clarifying questions, understanding conflict, re-framing agendas, effective group problem-solving, and understanding diversity.*

